

VZCZCXYZ0000
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHLB #1131/01 2871512
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 141512Z OCT 09
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5886
INFO RUEHDM/AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS 3803
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 3651
RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH 3518
RUEHTV/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV 1456
RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO 1402
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 3943
RHMCSUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L BEIRUT 001131

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/13/2019
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: MAJORITY AND OPPOSITION AGREE GOVERNMENT TO FORM
IN NEAR FUTURE

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The Lebanese cabinet could be formed within days, sources from the majority and minority agree, though all note that several important details remain unresolved. In the wake of the Syrian-Saudi summit last week, negotiations have progressed considerably and the opposition has backed away from several key demands. Parliament appears set to open on or near its constitutionally mandated date of October 20, although a short delay might occur due to caution or horsetrading. End summary.

MAJORITY CYNICAL BUT SANGUINE

¶2. (C) A government will likely be formed by the weekend or early next week, a guardedly optimistic majority-aligned independent MP Boutros Harb told the Ambassador October 14. The foundation of the deal with the opposition is "fair -- it's more than fair," he said. Harb outlined the remaining details to be resolved, emphasizing that the outstanding conflicts are not between the two blocs but within them. The Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), he alleged, is ready to surrender the telecommunications ministry but wants the health ministry, currently with Amal, in return. "Aoun thinks Saad can now ask Syria to shut up Berri," assessed Harb, who confidently predicted he would be the next justice minister despite his preference to remain an MP, given what he described as a lack of "serious parliamentarians."

¶3. (C) Despite his overall pessimism regarding the legitimacy of the opposition's tactics, independent pro-majority MP Robert Ghanem also predicted to the Ambassador the same day that a government would form soon. Ghanem emphasized that there is no Lebanese national political consensus, and pondered the question of re-examining the Tae'f accord. "Every country has a red line; parties play below the line, above it is national dissolution. There is no red line in Lebanon," he stated. Both Ghanem and Harb explained progress on government formation in the context of international dynamics, from Ankara's repositioning of its relationship with Tel Aviv to President Obama's regional initiatives. The previous week's summit between Syrian President Bashar al-Asad and Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz was perceived to be the key event releasing the deadlock in Lebanon, although both warned that a Syrian/Iranian "misunderstanding" could again complicate and delay the process.

OPPOSITION INDICATES ROADBLOCKS REMOVED

¶4. (C) "We have a real opportunity to form a government in the next week or after," caretaker Telecommunications Minister Gebran Bassil told polchief on October 14. Bassil, whose renomination as minister was a key sticking point in the first, failed round of negotiations, expressed optimism and confided that he believes Hariri is serious in moving forward on cabinet formation. Continuing talks have focused on shared principles and details of the cabinet, Bassil relayed. As a result of the talks, Bassil revealed, FPM leader Michel Aoun is prepared to concede his demands for the telecommunications ministry and a "sovereign" ministry. In exchange, the opposition has gained the right to name its own ministers, thus ensuring Bassil's continued status as minister. The FPM is clinging to its demand of five ministries instead of four ministries plus one minister position without portfolio, although Bassil ascribed any delay in government formation to Hariri's need to finalize negotiations with all parties, including his allies.

PARLIAMENT LIKELY TO OPEN DUE TO CONSENSUS

¶5. (C) Our interlocutors from both the majority and the opposition agree that a consensus is forming to open parliament on October 20 or shortly thereafter. Although

Bassil claimed that Druze leader Walid Jumblatt is trying to delay the opening of parliament until the government is formed, he assessed that the parties are likely to reach an agreement that will allow the parliamentary committees to be formed even before that time. Ali Hamdan, aide to Speaker Nabih Berri, told polchief on October 14 that Berri has

proposed several solutions including maintaining the committee formulas from the previous parliament or agreeing that any committee member who must subsequently resign upon being made a minister would be replaced by someone from the same bloc. Both Hamdan and Bassil agreed that the key outstanding difficulty is a disagreement between Amal and the FPM over the chairmanship of the finance committee, but they played down the significance of the dispute. Ghanem projected that parliament's opening may be delayed by a few days to assist the formation process, while Hamdan claimed that opening parliament would help the cabinet formation process by showing progress and cooperation in one body of the government.

¶6. (C) COMMENT: The common wisdom on both sides of the political fence is that a government will likely coalesce within the next seven to ten days, most likely after President Michel Sleiman's return from Spain early next week.

Although work still remains to be done on both the shape of the cabinet and the distribution of the parliamentary committees, both sides appear tired of the deadlock and willing to move forward.

SISON